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ABSTRACT

The trend in many schools is to move away from using the textbook exclusively in content area classrooms and move toward the integration of various pieces of children's literature, in many instances as a thematic unit. Using a thematic approach and incorporating trade books provides students with opportunities for cumulative learning and the discovery of connections between content-related subjects and diverse literary texts. Picture books, many of which are suitable for older children, can be used to teach content area material. Preservice teachers can begin to incorporate children's literature by using a trade book to support a specific lesson and then move on to develop thematic units of study around specific content area topics. A teacher educator who teaches both content area reading courses and children's literature courses has her students develop a variety of thematic units of study and interdisciplinary units across the curriculum. Problems with moving toward using trade books include lack of time for inservice teachers to plan lessons and the departmentalization of schools, which hinders the development of interdisciplinary units. However, the positives for students are worth the time and effort of the teachers. (Contains 14 references. A 23-item bibliography of children's literature is attached.) (RS)

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# INCORPORATING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE INTO THE CONTENT READING CLASSROOM

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by

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## INCORPORATING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE INTO THE CONTENT READING CLASSROOM

The trend in many schools is to move away from using the textbook exclusively in content area classrooms and move toward the integration of various pieces of children's literature, in many instances as a thematic unit. Traditionally the textbook has been the primary source of teaching information, but the emerging practice involves the use of a number of trade books which together present about the same information as in the textbooks. Let's examine why this practice of integrating children's literature into content area classrooms is a positive step?

First of all, textbooks often have density of concepts, are difficult to read and comprehend, often contain a bland collection of facts, and do not provide enough emphasis on relationships among facts and concepts (Cordeiro, 1992). On the other hand trade books can supplement textbook information by offering causal relationships between concepts and provide a framework for students to answer their own questions about reading. Thus, students are better able to understand what they read because of the connections they can make between the information in trade books and their prior knowledge.

Using a thematic approach, incorporating a number of trade books rather than just one textbook, provides students with opportunities for cumulative learning and the discovery of connections between content-related subjects and diverse literary texts. Students are exposed to a variety of authors, topics, and genres and have an opportunity for in-depth study of a topic that is not possible when using only a textbook. Thus students are able to build a broad background of prior knowledge in a specific content area subject.

Trade books improve the affective domain of learning. Simply giving students assigned pages to read in a textbook does little to stimulate learning in these content subjects (Moss, 1994) or a love of reading. Trade books are easier to understand, more interesting, and students can relate to them perhaps developing more interest in both reading and in the content area.

I would also liked to address specifically picture books which have been advocated for use with older students (Miletta, 1992; Neal & Moore, 1992). There are a variety of valid reasons for their use including the short format which allows integrating a picture book into one lesson. Many picture books deal with issues that are beyond the maturity level of young children (i.e., The Butter Battle Book, Lorax, both by Dr. Seuss; Window by Jeannie Baker; David Macaulay's Castle) . There are many that can be read and enjoyed at various age levels (Coat of Many Colors by Dolly Partridge; Just a Dream by Van Allsburg; The Wall by Eve Bunting.).

Many picture books also have a universal themes such as self-fulfillment in Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney, Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Dayby Judith Viorst. The Rainbow Fish is a beautiful story about sharing and friendship. Our children live in a society that is inundated with visuals, picture books provide a visual that is often missing in textbooks and other sources of information for older students. The illustrations in this brand new book, Just In Time For Christmas by one of our local authors, Louise Borden, bring to life the theme of family traditions.

Cordeiro (1992) suggests that we can use picture books to teach older elementary students how to learn in the content areas. Make Way for Ducklings by McClosky contains a great deal of content information about ducks and about Boston. This book, Stellaluna by Janell Cannon, is a wonderful story, but it also contains extensive information about both bats and birds. The Magic School Bus series by Joanna Cole contain both a humorous narrative, detailed factual information along with wonderful illustrations. Cordeiro (1992) suggests teaching children how to get information from books by using books such as these.

We have established reasons for integrating children's literature into content areas. But how is it most effectively accomplished. I would like to share with you how I teach students in my classes to accomplish this task. First of all, picture books can be integrated into individual lessons. This provides a natural basis for use of trade books based on curriculum objectives for specific content area. I see this happen particularly in student teaching and practicum situations in which students may be unable to use a thematic unit in a teaching situation. Instead they may select a trade book that supports a specific lesson. In order to do this, pre-service and in-service teachers need knowledge of the vast numbers of books that are available so book lists and resources are encouraged.

I recently observed a student teacher I supervise using The Button Box for a lesson to teach sorting. She first introduced the book, read it to the class and discussed it. Then she followed this by giving each student a baggie of assorted buttons. The rest of the lesson included some independent sorting, her selecting some buttons and having them predict what characteristic she used for the sort (brown, 4-hole, shank, etc.) The lesson ended with a bingo type game in which she called a specific characteristic of a button and they had to place a button such as that one on their card. When she was developing her plans for lessons on sorting and classifying, she remembered this picture book that fit naturally into the lesson she wanted to teach.

The primary way we teach students to integrate trade books is through the use of thematic Units of instruction. I teach content area reading classes and children's literature so I do this differently in content area classes and in children's literature classes. The focus of a thematic unit in content area classes is for students to use the strategies they have learned in the course. I ask that they integrate literature into their thematic unit.

To help them realize that it is possible to integrate literature into content area instruction and to help them see how to do it, I teach a lesson on literature. I begin this lesson by reading them a picture book that has a mature theme such as Oh, the Places You'll Go by Dr. Seuss. Then I put them in cooperative groups according to their major and give them 3 or 4 picture books they could relate in some way to their content area. They have to select one of the books and develop a lesson teaching a concept appropriate for a class they might or do teach. Some examples are Anno's Math Games III or How Much is a Million for students in math education; Castles or Round and Round for art education majors; The Z Was Zapped or How A Book is Made for English majors. I often use this wonderful wordless picture book, Window for either art or science majors and Lorax for science. For history or social studies I include When I Was Young in the Mountains, The Butter Battle Book, or The Drinking Gourd.

For their thematic unit in content area reading some students use a number of trade books and plan lessons around them. For most of my students, particularly those in secondary, a textbook is used as the primary source of instruction and they use literature for one or more specific lessons in the unit. Note the example lesson I have included for a secondary biology class using the Lorax by Dr. Seuss. This lesson is taken from a thematic unit on ecology prepared by a student. She used one of the strategies, Intra Act, from our text by Vacca and Vacca and applied it to the trade book.

In Children's Literature students develop a thematic unit around trade books. They are assigned to a specific content area (science, social studies, math and sometimes health). First they must determine the theme or focus of the unit and their unit objectives and goals. We provide library time for them them to gather fiction and nonfiction books to be used for the thematic unit. Then they decide student activities and sequence of the activities to accomplish their objectives.

This year I decided to develop interdisciplinary units across the curriculum in Children's Literature. I had two reasons for doing this. One, it provides an opportunity for students to plan together and I believe collaborative planning is a skill we should be developing in pre-service teachers. The other more obvious reason is to develop an interdisciplinary unit that could be useful for these students as they go into their classrooms.

I began by brainstorming possible themes that were broad enough to be interdisciplinary. We then decided on one specific theme for the entire class to use. In the future I may let each group work on a separate theme, but for this pilot we used the theme "food" for everyone so that we will have many ways to use this idea at various age levels with many trade books.

Then we divided into grade level groups. I have a small class so we have only a few groups, but you could have a group for each grade level. They were each given an assignment sheet like the one provided in your handout. The first week their tasks

were to decide on an overall purpose for the interdisciplinary unit, plan an activity to launch it, a culminating activity and bulletin board ideas. They were also to each select a content area: math, science, or social studies.

The second week students were provided some group time and they were charged with planning activities for art, music, health, and physical education. If there were enough group members, these could be content areas. But since our groups are small, I decided everyone could help plan these activities. They are given sheets similar to what I have included in your packet on which they can plan specific activities. Those included are samples that another instructor and I developed for a bears theme.

Prior to each of the group meetings I went through the specific requirements for each person in the group. Everyone is responsible for helping to develop a bibliography of trade books that could be used at this grade level and for this specific theme and for the content area to which they are designated. Each group must also determine the specific books they want to include as part of an interdisciplinary unit. By the third week of this project each person should have found some books on which they can make decisions and be able to plan some activities for their specific content area. They add to the bibliography each week until the project is over.

Outside of class each person is expected to develop lessons plans for their content area. All lesson plans include objective(s) and follow the before/during/after model. On the last days of scheduled classes each person will present a 10 minute mini-lesson.

I believe the move toward using trade books in classrooms is very positive, however, there are some difficulties. Teachers in classrooms have limited planning time for reading many trade books and developing thematic units especially across the curriculum. Often in the intermediate grades, a school is departmentalized and there is no planning time for teachers together so interdisciplinary units are not possible. But I believe the positives for students--interesting books, books that they can and want to read, and building a broad base of background knowledge by connecting different areas of the curriculum are worth the time and effort of the teachers.

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